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ABSTRACT

The BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training) Initiative was evaluated in meeting the following goals for youth workers: (1) increase and strengthen training opportunities at the local level; (2) help communities develop professional development systems; (3) build local capacity to make training accessible and supported by youth-serving organizations; (4) employ facilitators from the youth-serving sector; (5) promote sensitivity to the culture of the youth population; (6) create connections with career ladders within the field of youth development; (7) foster professional associations, certificates/degrees through higher education institutions, and recognition programs; and (8) institutionalize supports for professional development as part of a community's efforts to help young people reach their full potential. Data gathered from 1999-2001 from 15 BEST Initiative sites demonstrates that the program is effective both as a strategy and as a model for building a system of professional development services and supports to youth workers, and resulted in the following conclusions: (1) professional development must be embedded in the local youth-serving sector; (2) a common language and strong networks for information sharing are keys to supporting youth workers; (3) youth workers must have support and a commitment to youth development from organizations as a whole to implement effective programming; (4) professional development must be continuous and provide a range of opportunities; and (5) building organizational capacity to support youth workers helps improve retention. (Appendices include contact information, an evaluation methodology, and an AYD (Advancing Youth Development) curriculum. Includes 5 graphs and 8 tables.) (MO)

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BEST

Strengthens Youth Worker Practice

An Evaluation of Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST)

REPORT

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An Evaluation of
Building Exemplary Systems
for Training Youth Workers
(BEST)

REPORT

conducted by the

Center for School and
Community Services
Academy for Educational Development
New York City
2002

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Foreword

This evaluation report describes the findings from the impact study of the 15-city National BEST (*B*uilding *E*xemplary *S*ystems for *T*raining Youth Workers) Initiative managed by the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) of the Academy for Educational Development (AED). This major initiative, designed to increase training and education resources for youth workers in local communities, has been underway since 1996.

The BEST Initiative is implemented by local intermediary organizations that received modest support from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds and matching local funds. Collectively, the local sites have successfully delivered training programs based on *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers* (AYD) to thousands of youth workers from a wide array of organizations. A number of sites have also created youth development certificate programs in partnership with their local higher education institutions, expanded youth worker training throughout their states, and increased recognition of the value of youth workers and youth work throughout their communities.

This report documents the data gathered from youth workers regarding changes in their youth development practices with young people after participating in AYD training programs and other professional development opportunities through the BEST Initiative. The youth workers also voice their opinions about the additional professional development opportunities and resources needed to help them better serve young people and to increase the value and recognition of the youth work profession.

These findings illustrate the urgency of bringing the BEST strategies to more youth workers in additional communities throughout the country. Please feel free to contact me to discuss how AYD training and the BEST Initiative can impact the practice of youth work in your community.

Elaine Johnson

Elaine Johnson
Director, National Training Institute for Community Youth Work
Vice President, Academy for Educational Development

Acknowledgments

Many individuals from the Academy for Educational Development (AED), the Center for School and Community Services (SCS), the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI), and BEST Initiative sites contributed to this study and report. Thanks are due to Cheri Fancsali, Vernay Mitchell, and Lea Williams of SCS who conducted research for the study, with assistance from Mary Lai, Shelly Wong, and Kristine Surla of SCS and Jacqueline Scott of NTI. Kelley Fitzgerald, Jennifer Gajdosik, Patricia Gill, and Michele Irwin from NTI also conducted telephone interviews with youth workers. Cheri Fancsali wrote this report; it was edited by Elayne Archer and Rebecca McBride, and designed by AM PM Design. Wanda Dallas entered the data and Noemi Corujo provided administrative assistance.

Thanks also go to members of the BEST Initiative advisory board who assisted with the design of the study: Deborah Craig (Kansas City BEST), Alan Cushing (Chicago BEST), Deth Im (Kansas City BEST), Jessica Mates (New York City BEST), Renae Ogletree (Chicago BEST), and Deborah Stewart (New Haven BEST). BEST site directors and staff assisted in the data collection and provided feedback on the findings. We are especially grateful to the BEST stakeholders and hundreds of youth workers who participated in the study; they provided valuable information on and insight into the field of youth development and the youth work profession.

We extend our thanks and appreciation to the leadership of NTI staff: Jennifer Gajdosik, who served as Project Manager, and Elaine Johnson, NTI Director.

Lastly, we thank the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds for their generous support of the BEST Initiative and of this study and report.

Academy for Educational Development
Center for School and Community Services
New York City

2002

Executive Summary

This executive summary presents the key findings of an evaluation of the BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) Initiative, funded by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds in 1996. The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) of the Academy for Educational Development (AED) has managed the initiative since 1997. More than 5,000 youth workers have participated in BEST Initiative professional development activities in their communities. AED's Center for School and Community Services conducted a two-year evaluation of the impact of the BEST Initiative on the training and practice of youth workers and on the youth-serving sector in their communities.

Background: The Need for Youth Worker Professional Development Systems

Many young people, particularly in low- income communities, rely on youth development programs to help them make a safe, healthy transition through adolescence. Youth development programs foster the strength and resilience of young people, viewing them as resources in their own development rather than as "problems to be solved."

The quality of these programs relies, in large part, on the ability of staff to practice the youth development approach with young people. The knowledge and skills needed to practice a youth development approach are far-reaching, yet preliminary research conducted in the mid-1990's showed that most youth workers did not have access to coherent education, training, and professional development opportunities that can effectively prepare them for this work. Indeed, in most communities across America, core training in youth development concepts, principles, and practices was not available. Usually training was provided by national or regional organizations through large conferences, which are often too costly and time-consuming for staff of community-based youth-serving organizations to attend.

Addressing this need requires local cross-agency systems of training and education in the field of youth development that link with other professional development opportunities for youth workers. Before the BEST Initiative, no such efforts existed at the national or local level. Comprehensive training for direct-service youth workers was virtually nonexistent and, when available, not readily accessible or affordable. Further, youth worker training was often provided in a "one-shot" format, using no common language, concepts, and principles, and youth workers often received little support in "infusing" their training into their practice or that of their agency.

Finally, in the youth development field, there was no widely accepted system for credentialing or accrediting youth workers who complete training programs. Taken together, the state of professional development for youth workers added to the field's lack of professional identity and legitimacy and encouraged the public perception that youth work is not a competency-based field requiring competency-based training of its youth workers.

The BEST Initiative

The BEST Initiative has the following goals:

- Increase and strengthen training opportunities for youth workers at the local level.
- Help communities develop professional development systems for training and educating youth workers.
- Build local capacity to make youth worker training accessible—financially and logistically—to youth workers and supported by youth-serving organizations.
- Employ facilitators from the youth-serving sector.
- Promote sensitivity to the culture of the youth population and youth worker.
- Create connections with career ladders within the field of youth development.
- Foster other elements, such as a youth worker professional association, certificates/degrees through higher education institutions, and youth worker recognition programs.
- Institutionalize this array of formal and informal supports for the professional development of youth workers as part of a community's efforts to help young people reach their full potential.

In 15 cities nationwide, the BEST Initiative has created the foundation for building and sustaining local interagency systems of professional development grounded in the youth development approach. The BEST Initiative helps local communities establish professional development systems, so that youth workers are trained for their profession and connected to an array of programs, policies, and resources that can help institutionalize the youth development approach in their organizations and communities. The initiative is implemented in each local community by a lead intermediary organization, whose mission focuses on youth development or youth worker professional development. All sites offer youth workers training based on *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers* (AYD), as well as courses in additional areas supporting youth development practice and other forms of professional development, such as mentoring, peer support, direct coaching, and field experiences. Some sites also offer or broker

technical assistance to local youth-serving organizations to support youth development practices and provide opportunities for cross-organization networking.

Evaluation Methods

This study used multiple methods to investigate the impact of the BEST Initiative in several areas. Data were gathered from 1999 through 2001 from the 15 BEST Initiative sites through pre- and post-training surveys completed by AYD training participants, interviews with youth workers, written reflection logs completed by youth workers, and interviews with stakeholders.[1]

Specifically, the evaluation documented:

- participation in the AYD training and other professional development activities;
- impact of the AYD training on youth workers;
- impact of the initiative on the local lead agency and organizations with AYD-trained youth workers; and
- successes and barriers to implementation and sustainability of the initiative.

Key Findings

The key findings from the evaluation are summarized below.

Youth Worker Characteristics

- Youth workers who participated in AYD training were predominantly female.
- Just over half (56%) were African-American, 28% were white, and 10% were Latino.
- The majority (81%) had attended college, and over half (52%) had a college or graduate degree.
- Almost one-fourth (23%) had less than one year of experience in the youth work field, and almost half (46%) had five or more years of experience.

Impact on Youth Workers

- Three-fourths of surveyed youth workers said the AYD training had a "great deal" or "good amount" of impact on their practices.
- Statistically significant increases were seen in the frequency with which youth workers used specific youth development practices. The areas of greatest impact included:
- inclusion of youth in the implementation of programs and activities;

[1] Stakeholders were youth development funders, executive administrators, and practitioners as well as youth workers from four BEST site communities.

- a greater understanding of youth and youth development;
- application of youth development concepts in work with young people;
- development of a common language around youth development; and
- increased networking and interactions with other youth workers.

Impact on Organizations

- More than two-thirds (69%) of surveyed youth workers agreed that participation in the AYD training had an impact on the organization where they worked. As a result, many surveyed youth workers and interviewed stakeholders reported that their organization provided better programming to youth.
- Organizations strengthened the system of support available to youth workers by:
  - providing increased supports for professional development, including mentoring, training, and release-time for youth workers to attend conferences and workshops;
  - fostering greater collaboration among agencies and mentoring; and
  - approaching their work with an increased youth development focus.

Nonetheless, youth workers also cautioned that change at the organizational level takes time: to sustain change and continue improving services, professional development should be ongoing and involve a greater proportion of an agency's staff.

Local Systems of Support

In the survey, youth workers and stakeholders identified key supports as critical to youth work:

- Youth workers reported that additional training in youth development and other related topics was the most important support they needed for their work.
- Mentoring and networking were also important supports.
- Crucial to incorporating youth development into daily practice was having supportive supervisors and co-workers who understood and embraced the principles of youth development.

Professionalization of Youth Work: Voices from the Field

In the view of funders, agencies, other youth workers, and the public at large, the status of youth work is an essential issue in the BEST Initiative. Much literature on youth work calls for the professionalization of the field. Findings from this evaluation show that those working in the field—direct-service staff—also believe it is important to raise the status of the field, fostering a sense of youth workers as professionals, as summarized below.

- Youth workers surveyed overwhelmingly agreed that courses, certificates, and degrees in youth development would

increase the professional status of youth work.

- Youth workers reported that training in youth development and other related areas was the most important way to enhance the field's credibility and develop the skills of youth workers.
- Stakeholders interviewed agreed that youth workers need professional development on an ongoing basis, but there was no consensus about the need for requiring credentials.
- Youth workers also valued public campaigns to promote youth work as a profession and improve the public perception of youth and youth work.
- The lack of career ladders, competitive salaries, and benefits in the youth work field were reported by youth workers and stakeholders as key barriers to increasing the professional status of the field. Youth workers with a college degree made far less than college graduates nationwide and less than the average social worker, teacher, or registered nurse.
- Although a majority (55%) of youth workers completing the survey said they planned to stay in the field for at least five more years, a substantial portion (nearly one-third) were not sure how long they would stay in the field, and 13% planned to leave the field within four years.
- Youth workers who received higher salaries and more support for professional development from their supervisors and organizations were more likely to stay longer in the field of youth development.

Research Conclusions and Implications

The youth development field has been challenged by its low professional status, lack of infrastructure to support the ongoing professional development of youth workers, and need for greater investments in youth worker education and training. This study demonstrates that the BEST Initiative is effective both as a strategy and a model for building a system of professional development services and supports to youth workers. The model allows for flexibility for every community to respond to its local context but also promotes a common philosophy, language, and nationally recognized curriculum. As a strategy, national technical assistance can help a wide variety of communities adapt the implementation of BEST.

The results of this study show that:

- Professional development must be embedded in the local youth-serving sector.
- A common language and strong networks for information sharing are keys to supporting youth workers.
- In addition to the requisite skills and knowledge, youth workers must have support and a commitment to youth development from supervisors and the organization as a whole to implement effective programming.

- Professional development must be continuous and provide a range of opportunities to increase youth workers' knowledge of youth development and skill in providing programming for youth.
- Building organizational capacity to support youth workers helps improve retention among youth workers.

Many questions about the impact of the BEST Initiative could not be answered by this study. As the field continues to develop, additional research is necessary to guide efforts to professionalize the field. Future research should address the questions below. Answers to these questions will further understanding of this study's findings and provide future directions for expanding and sustaining professional development opportunities for youth workers.

- To what extent do young people experience a change in the practice of youth workers trained in AYD?
- What lessons can be learned from the BEST sites that have linked AYD training programs to standards for youth programs?
- What would be gained or lost in the delivery of the AYD training programs through online/distance learning technology?
- Do certain characteristics of youth workers, such as educational levels, workplace settings, and job responsibilities, have an influence on who has access to AYD training programs?
- Is fee-for-service a viable strategy for sustaining local BEST initiatives?
- Would AYD training, tailored for teachers, probation officers, healthcare workers, school counselors, and other professionals who work with youth, strengthen young people's ability to achieve developmental youth outcomes?
- What is the long-term impact of the BEST Initiative on recruitment and retention patterns of youth workers?
- Will expansion of AYD training programs increase the demand of youth workers for youth development certificate, degree, and apprenticeship programs?
- How can the BEST Initiative help create a career path for youth workers with increased salaries and benefits and further professionalize the field?

In conclusion, the evaluation findings demonstrate that the BEST Initiative is meeting its goals. It clearly addresses the needs of the youth work profession identified through this study and fosters an infrastructure of professional development and support for the field of youth development.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) Initiative, funded by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds in 1996. The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) has managed the initiative since 1997. The goals of the initiative are to increase and strengthen training opportunities for youth workers at the local level and to help communities develop professional development systems for training them. Since 1996, more than 5,000 youth workers have participated in BEST Initiative professional development activities in their communities. AED's Center for School and Community Services conducted a two-year evaluation of the impact of the BEST Initiative on the training and practice of youth workers as well as on the youth-serving sector in their communities.

Background: The Need for Youth Worker Professional Development Systems

Many young people, particularly in low-income communities, rely on youth development programs to help them make a safe, healthy transition through adolescence. Such programs foster the strength and resilience of young people, viewing them as resources in their own development rather than as "problems to be solved." More than 30 years of social science research show the positive effects of these programs in terms of youth outcomes.[1] The quality of these programs relies, in large part, on the ability of staff to practice the youth development approach with young people. Practicing the youth development approach means understanding theories and concepts—related to areas such as adolescent development, individual assessment, program planning and implementation, and teamwork—and then applying this knowledge to help young people assess their own strengths and establish and meet goals for their own development. Youth development also means establishing appropriate boundaries with young people and, in turn, helping them establish boundaries that maintain their intellectual, physical, and emotional health. Practicing the youth development approach means helping young people understand, navigate, and avail themselves of local organizations, programs, and public systems that interface with youth. Finally, youth development practice is strengthened with the ability to communicate and relate effectively with co-workers and young people, practice good organizational skills, and use technology in the workplace.

[1] For example, see P. Benson, *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Brotherhood, 1990); M.D. Resnick, P.S. Bearman, R.W. Blum, and K.E. Bauman, et al. "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278:10 (September 10, 1997); E. Roehlkepartain and P. Benson, *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1996), pamphlet; S. Zeldin, M. Kimball, and L. Price, *What Are the Day-to-Day Experiences that Promote Youth*

BEST is a win-win for all. It helps organizations fulfill their missions and helps ensure that youth will be out there on a successful course.

—Executive director of lead organization in BEST Initiative site

The knowledge and skills needed to practice a youth development approach are far-reaching, yet preliminary research conducted in the mid-1990's showed that most youth workers did not have access to coherent education, training, and professional development opportunities that can effectively prepare them for this work. Indeed, in most communities across America, core training in youth development concepts, principles, and practices was not available. Usually training was provided by national or regional organizations through large conferences, which are often too costly and time-consuming for staff of community-based youth-serving organizations to attend.

Further, youth worker training often had limited effect because it was fragmented, with staff attending a variety of different training programs not connected to one another in language, theory, or approach—underscoring to many the need for a common language and a shared understanding of concepts and principles in the field. Finally, trained youth workers often received little support in "infusing" their training into their practice or that of their organization. Without such support, the time, energy, and money spent on training are often wasted.

Another important factor affecting training in the youth development field is the lack of a widely accepted system for credentialing or accrediting youth workers who complete training programs. Unlike other fields, where acknowledgment received from the completion of a training program has a direct effect on upward mobility and career paths, youth workers seldom reap career-enhancing benefits from training. This further decreases the sense of professional identity and legitimacy among youth workers and fosters the public perception that youth work is not a competency-based field requiring competency-based training of its workers.

The BEST Initiative

The goals of the BEST Initiative were to increase and strengthen training opportunities for youth workers at the local level and help communities develop professional development systems for training and educating them. The BEST Initiative sought to build local capacity to make

youth worker training accessible—financially and logistically—to youth workers and fully supported by youth-serving organizations. Fundamental to BEST was the use of trainers from the youth-serving sector, extensive follow-up, sensitivity to the culture of the youth population and youth workers, and connections with career ladders within the field of youth development. In addition, the BEST Initiative hoped to foster other elements, such as a youth worker professional association, certificates/degrees through higher education institutions, and youth worker recognition programs. Most importantly, this array of formal and informal supports for the professional development of youth workers would be institutionalized as part of a community's efforts to help young people reach their full potential.

In 15 cities nationwide, the BEST Initiative has created the foundation for building and sustaining local interagency systems of professional development grounded in the youth development approach. The BEST Initiative helps local communities establish professional development systems for their youth workers, so that youth workers are trained for their profession and connected to an array of programs, policies, and resources that can help institutionalize the youth development approach in their organizations and communities. The initiative is implemented in each local community by a lead intermediary organization, whose primary mission focuses on youth development or youth worker professional development.

All sites offer youth workers training based on *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers* (AYD), as well as courses in additional areas supporting youth development practice and other forms of professional development, such as mentoring, peer support, direct coaching, and field experiences. Some sites also offer or broker technical assistance to local youth-serving organizations to support youth development practices and provide opportunities for cross-agency networking.

BEST Initiative Sites and Lead Organizations

The 15 BEST Initiative sites were funded to deliver training to youth workers serving young people in low-income communities. The effort began with seven phase-I sites, which were funded for three years in 1996 and for two additional years in 1999. Recognizing the progress of the first seven sites in building professional development systems for youth workers, as well as the need for more youth workers trained in youth development practice, the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds expanded the BEST Initiative sites to include an additional seven phase-II sites, which were funded for three years in 1999. An additional site in Washington D.C. was supported in part by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds in 1999 and in part by the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation. Table 1 presents the location of the BEST Initiative sites (see Appendix A for a brief description of the sites).

Table 1: BEST Initiative Local Sites

Phase I Sites (funded in 1996)

- Kansas City, MO: YouthNet of Greater Kansas City
- Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Child and Youth Care Learning Center
- New York City, NY: Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York
- Philadelphia, PA: Children, Youth and Family Council Education Consortium and Greater Philadelphia Federation of Settlements
- Pinellas, FL: Juvenile Welfare Board
- Portland, OR: Youth Services Consortium
- San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development

Phase II Sites (funded in 1999)

- Boston, MA: The Medical Foundation
- Chicago, IL: Chicago Youth Agency Partnership
- Hampton, VA: The Training Institute of Alternatives, Inc.
- Jacksonville, FL: Jacksonville Children's Commission
- Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN: Center for 4-H Youth Development of the University of Minnesota
- New Haven, CT: Youth Development Training and Resource Center of The Consultation Center
- Springfield, MA: Partners for a Healthier Community
- Washington, D.C: DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation

I think that working with youth is the most important and rewarding work that we'll ever have the privilege of doing...AYD can only help us **do a better job.** Thank you.

—Youth worker

The lead organizations selected to implement the BEST Initiative are intermediary organizations identified as key players within the local youth-serving sector. Lead organizations are positioned to convene stakeholders across the youth-serving community, have sufficient organizational capacity to market and deliver the training program, and demonstrate strong credibility within the youth-serving sector to gain buy-in from agency administrators and funders. They also have a commitment to promoting the youth development approach to working with youth (see Appendix B for criteria).

Every lead organization in the BEST Initiative tailors its professional development system to its community context and offers a variety of opportunities for the youth-serving sector. At the core of each initiative is a youth worker training program based on *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers* (AYD), and some sites offer courses in additional topics supporting youth development practice. Some intermediaries also offer, or broker, technical assistance to local youth serving organizations to support youth development practices and provide opportunities for cross-organization networking. This technical assistance includes helping youth-serving organization executives align their organizations in support of youth development policies and practices. Managers of these local youth-serving organizations send youth workers to the AYD training programs and make it possible for their staff (if invited by the intermediary) to be co-facilitators of the AYD curriculum with the intermediary's lead trainer.

Local adaptations of the BEST Initiative include partnerships with local colleges to offer certificate and degree programs to youth workers, and some sites have held citywide celebrations to recognize the value of youth workers in their communities. A number of BEST Initiative sites are participating in other local and national efforts to create youth program standards, increase youth worker salaries, and address workforce development issues.

The Role of the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work

Since its creation by AED in 1997, NTI's mission has been to strengthen the field of youth development by building a national system of youth worker professional development grounded in youth development principles. NTI's goals are to: grow the nation's youth worker professional development system by bringing BEST to new communities; expand the array of AYD-based training, education, and professional development opportunities available to youth workers through BEST sites and link those opportunities to a recognized career path; and ensure the quality and impact of youth worker training, education, and professional development programs by maintaining standards for training delivery and the practice of the youth development approach.

As the national technical assistance provider to the BEST Initiative, NTI staff conduct visits and provide telephone assistance on a variety of topics—such as training program delivery, staffing, and generating community buy-in—to lead organizations. From 1997 to 2000, NTI held annual meetings, which provided opportunities for site teams to meet with NTI and network with staff from other sites. In addition, NTI publishes a newsletter, *BEST of Youth Development*, and has available a listserv for the 30 program managers across the BEST Initiative sites to pose questions and share strategies for dealing with issues.

NTI also manages the AYD curriculum and trains facilitators in the use of this curriculum with youth workers in BEST Initiative sites as well as in other professional development programs. Lastly, NTI works with sites to connect AYD training programs with other efforts to institutionalize the initiative and build the youth development field.

The Cornerstone of BEST: Youth Development Training

BEST Initiative sites offer training based on the AYD curriculum, designed for direct-service youth workers, especially those serving youth from "high-risk situations."[2] The curriculum introduces youth workers to the youth development approach and its implications for practice. The training program comprises seven sessions building on one another and requiring at least 28 hours to complete, as described below.

- **Introduction to Youth Development:** Youth workers reflect on their own experience as youth, recognize the importance of youth work in the lives of young people, and learn some of the

[2] The curriculum was developed by AED's Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, in collaboration with the National Network for Youth, Inc., with funding from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

core concepts and language of youth development.

- **Developmental Youth Outcomes:** Youth workers define the goals they have for young people and young people have for themselves and learn strategies to help them "get there" by using the youth development approach.
- **Cultural Assumptions:** Youth workers identify the barriers that adults bring to their work with youth and learn alternative caring behaviors that promote developmental outcomes for youth.
- **Core Competencies of Youth Workers:** Youth workers examine the key attributes, skills, and knowledge of an exemplary youth worker.
- **Opportunities and Supports:** Youth workers learn how "best practice" requires the engagement of youth in a wide array of opportunities, supports, and services.
- **Youth Participation:** Youth workers discuss the practices and policies of meaningful youth participation and ways to promote them in their programs.
- **Practice, Review, and Celebration:** Youth workers deepen their learning about youth development through practice and review.

The BEST Initiative sites were encouraged to tailor the delivery of the AYD curriculum to their local context. Some sites delivered the AYD training program once a week for seven weeks, while others delivered it twice a week for a month. One site offered the training at a three-day weekend retreat, and others experimented with evening hours to accommodate youth workers' busy schedules. Research had demonstrated that youth workers learned better from individuals with youth work experience trained to facilitate the AYD course rather than from professional trainers who "learned" youth development.[1] Therefore, facilitators at most sites had direct experience working with young people.

To strengthen facilitators' ability to deliver AYD, NTI convened the AYD Symposium in October 2000; nearly 40 lead trainers from all the BEST Initiative sites attended. The participants discussed specific aspects of their training programs and shared effective practices with one another. A year later, NTI hosted another AYD Symposium with the theme "Maximizing Youth Worker Learning." This three-day event focused on increasing youth worker application of the youth development approach. NTI plans to convene this group of facilitators regularly and to continue supporting the development of the AYD trainers' network.

[1] Wanda Fleming, *A Briefing on Youth Work Surveys of the BEST Initiative: Update* (Washington, D.C: National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, 1995).

Chapter One
Evaluation Methodology and Youth Worker Survey Respondents

The two-year evaluation of the impact of the BEST Initiative on youth worker practices and on the youth-serving sector in their communities specifically documented:

- participation in the AYD training and other professional development activities;
- impact of the AYD training on youth workers;
- impact of the initiative on the local lead agency and organizations with trained youth workers; and
- successes and barriers to implementation and sustainability of the initiative.

To achieve these goals, the Center for School and Community Services used a multimethod approach, including the following:

- pre/post-surveys of youth workers participating in the training (for the pre-training survey, N=433, and for the post-training survey, N=242);
- interviews with four to five key stakeholders at four sites (N=19)[4];
- open-ended survey of reflections (reflection logs) with one to seven youth workers at four sites (N=20); and
- telephone interviews with two to four AYD trained youth workers at every site (N=43).

The surveys were administered at 14 sites, and the interviews were conducted with youth workers from all 15 sites.[5] The stakeholder interviews and reflection logs were administered at four sites: two phase-I sites (YouthNet of Greater Kansas City and the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York) and two phase-II sites (the Chicago Youth Agency Partnership and the Youth Development Training and Resource Center of the Consultation Center in New Haven, CT). These sites reflected the diversity of BEST Initiative sites in terms of funding phase, geographic location, type of lead agency, and youth workers (gender, age, race/ethnicity, experience) participating in the AYD training. The evaluation methodology is described in more detail in Appendix C.

[4] Stakeholders were youth development funders, executive administrators, and practitioners as well as youth workers from four BEST Initiative site communities.

[5] Youth workers from one site were not asked to complete the survey because the training provided at that site differed substantially from the *AYD* curriculum, and the training schedule did not coincide with the schedule for collecting survey data.

Having a **common language** is always essential for an accurate and clear understanding. This training (AYD) provided me with that clarity.

—Youth worker survey respondent

Youth Worker Characteristics

This section describes the youth workers participating in the AYD training and completing the pre-training survey in terms of their race/ethnicity, gender, level of education, employment setting, and work experience.

Currently, no nationally representative data exist on youth workers. The youth workers participating in the AYD training reflected a diverse population, as shown in Table 2. The majority (53%) of youth workers in this sample were employed at community-based youth-serving organizations. Many also worked for government-supported youth-serving organizations; local affiliates of national organizations (such as the 4-H Club); independent, nonaffiliated community-based organizations; educational institutions; and faith-based organizations. Two-thirds of respondents were female; over half (56%) were African-American, 28% were white, and 10% were Latino/a. Most youth workers responding to the survey had some post-secondary education: 29% had attended college, 39% had a college degree, and 13% had attended graduate school.

The youth workers were diverse in terms of their age and years of experience: slightly over one-fourth (26%) were between the ages of 18 and 25; one-third (34%) were between 26 and 35; 22% were between 36 and 45; and 18% were over 45. The number of years respondents had worked as youth workers ranged from less than one (23%) to more than 20 (5%). Nearly half (48%) of the respondents had been at their current position for less than one year at the time of the pre-training survey. Another 39% had been at their job for one-to-four years, and 10% had been at their job for five-to-10 years. Few had been at their current job for more than 10 years.

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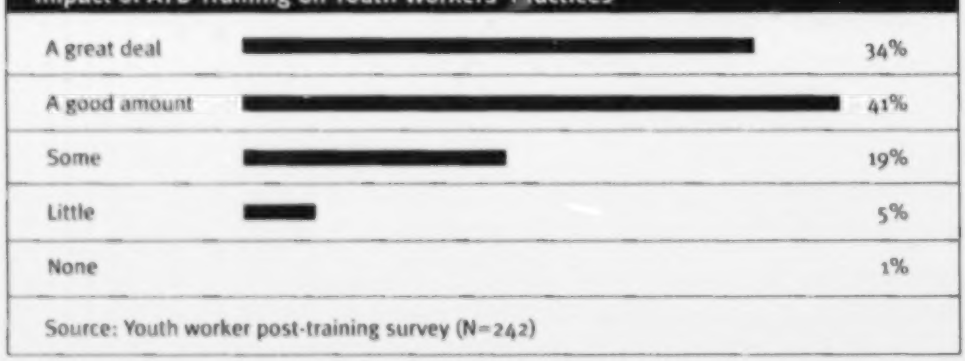
Table 2A: Characteristics of Youth Worker Survey Respondents		
Type of Organization	Community-based youth-serving organization	53%
	Government supported youth-serving organization	11%
	Local affiliate of a national youth-service organization	9%
	Educational institution	9%
	Other	9%
	Faith-based organization	6%
	Training organization	1%
Gender	Female	66%
	Male	34%
Race/ ethnicity	African-American	56%
	Asian	2%
	Latino/Hispanic	10%
	Caucasian/White	28%
	Other	3%
Age	18-25	26%
	26-35	34%
	36-45	22%
	46 or older	18%
Highest level of education completed	Some high school	2%
	High school diploma	11%
	GED	4%
	Some college	29%
	College degree	39%
	Graduate school	13%

Table 2B: Years of Experience in Youth Work Profession and at Current Position		
	Years in Youth Work Profession	Years at Current Position
Less than one year	23%	48%
1 to 4 years	31%	39%
5 to 10 years	29%	10%
11 to 20 years	12%	2%
More than 20 years	5%	1%
Source: Youth worker pre-training survey (N=433)		

Chapter Two
Impact of the BEST Initiative on Youth Workers

Youth workers responding to the survey described the BEST Initiative's AYD training as having a positive impact on their daily practices as well as on opportunities to network with other youth workers. According to the pre- and post-training surveys of youth workers, one-third (34%) of respondents reported that the training had a great deal of impact on their practices; 41% reported that it had a "good amount of impact"; 19% said it had "some impact"; and 6% said it had little or no impact (see graph below). Interviewed stakeholders also reported that, as a result of the BEST Initiative, youth workers were better trained and were using a youth development approach to their work.

Impact of AYD Training on Youth Workers' Practices



Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=242)

These findings were corroborated by data collected through interviews with 43 youth workers, with 41 maintaining that the training had a positive impact on their work. (The two interviewees describing the training as not helpful attended the same training and described the sessions as "poorly facilitated.") Moreover, in reflection logs, the responses of youth workers to the question, "How relevant are the concepts and ideas presented in the training to your work with youth?" further demonstrated the positive impact of AYD training. All youth workers completing reflection logs (n=20) described the AYD training as very relevant to their work: "The training reminded me it's about the kids, not me," one wrote. Youth workers noted that the training influenced them in specific ways: it fostered a common language around youth development, encouraged networking among youth workers, changed many of their day-to-day practices, and increased their understanding of youth and youth development.

A Common Language

A common, professional language around youth development allows youth workers and other staff in youth-serving organizations to articulate the underlying concepts

Sixty-nine percent of surveyed youth workers agreed that their participation in the AYD training **had an impact** on the organization for which they worked.

of the work. It also serves to legitimize the field by providing objective concepts that can be discussed across other professions and disciplines; elevates the status of youth workers and the profession of youth work; and helps foster the support of funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders.[6] Many youth workers identified developing a framework for youth development and a common language as the most valuable aspects of the BEST Initiative's AYD training. The framework assisted youth workers in implementing and developing practices with clear goals and outcomes. One youth worker said:

The youth development framework was the most valuable. It gave structure to something that was ambiguous and helped me with planning and making it a living tool.

Two other youth workers stated:

It provided a vocabulary of terminology for me to put into practice.

It created a common vocabulary and concepts for co-workers. It serves as a base for working with the youth.

Further, the AYD training brought together youth workers from a variety of agencies and helped them develop a common approach around youth development:

The most valuable thing about the training was that it tapped into the community here—all of the different agencies that send people to the training, we learned and discussed together. Then the same philosophy and approach is taken back by all agencies to the community so that we can promote each other's work.

The notion of a common language was also powerful, youth workers reported, in their work with staff in their own agencies who had not received the training, and in providing technical assistance to other organizations. For example, one youth worker described how the training gave her the language to communicate with teachers about different approaches to working with youth.

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[6] Center For Youth Development and Policy Research, *Training for Youth Workers: An Assessment Guide for Community-Based Youth-Serving Organizations to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: 1995).

Connecting Youth Workers and Increased Networking

Youth workers reported on the post-training survey and in interviews and reflection logs that the AYD training helped them become more aware of community resources, connect with other agencies and organizations with similar missions, and feel less isolated in their work. In fact, more than half of the 43 interviewed youth workers said the networking opportunities and interactions with other youth workers were the most valuable parts of the training. Youth workers found sharing ideas and opinions with others in the field extremely productive. Several stated:

It helped me understand the importance of connecting with youth and connecting our youth with other agencies in the community.

The youth worker training has been great for me. I don't feel so isolated in my work with youth.

The interactions with my peers were great. They had great ideas. I was able to implement some of their ideas in my program, and they worked.

I enjoyed getting to know other youth workers, hear what their opinions and struggles are, and share tools and ideas with them.

Impact on Specific Youth Development Practices

Youth workers work in a variety of settings, including school-based afterschool programs, community-based youth-serving agencies, and organizations providing juvenile justice, mental health, and social services. Despite this variety of settings, a majority of youth workers participating in the AYD training regularly used a core set of youth development practices in their work. According to the post-training surveys, the practices youth workers reported using most often (approximately 10 months after training) were:

- identifying their own strengths and areas needing improvement (80% used it regularly or often);
- planning and designing activities promoting developmental goals (74% used it regularly or often);
- engaging youth in specific roles for planning and implementing activities (66% used it regularly or often); and
- working with youth to help them understand and appreciate diversity (66% used it regularly or often).

Practices youth workers reported using least often following training included:

- engaging youth in youth-led community activities, such as community service (26% used it rarely or never);
- recruiting adult community members to work directly with youth (24% used it rarely or never); and
- documenting program changes made based on feedback from youth (22% used it rarely or never).

Engaging youth in youth-led community activities was an area where a substantial proportion (28%) of youth workers

reported that the AYD training was their first exposure to the practice, indicating that lower implementation might be related to some youth workers not having the experience or resources to put the practice in place more regularly. Table 3 presents youth workers' use of youth development practices after AYD training.

Table 3: Use of Youth Development Practices After AYD Training	How often do you include this practice in your work with young people?		
	Regularly/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never
a. Engaging youth in a formal assessment of their strengths as well as their needs.	63%	28%	9%
b. Documenting every participant's developmental goals.	52%	28%	20%
c. Creating a plan for helping every participant meet his/her developmental goals.	60%	25%	16%
d. Planning and designing activities that promote developmental goals.	74%	19%	6%
e. Engaging youth in specific roles for planning and implementation of activities.	66%	23%	11%
f. Engaging youth in specific roles for decision making and leading activities.	62%	28%	10%
g. Soliciting on-going feedback from youth as a part of program evaluation.	63%	26%	12%
h. Documenting program changes based on feedback from youth.	48%	30%	22%
i. Meeting with youth to discuss their progress towards goals and assess their needs and concerns.	64%	23%	13%
j. Working with youth to help them understand and appreciate diverse cultures, races, genders, disabilities, and sexual orientations.	66%	24%	11%
k. Working with youth to help them create rewards for participation.	58%	26%	16%
l. Engaging youth in youth-led community activities such as community service, advocacy, and civic leadership.	46%	28%	26%
m. Participating in community-wide activities promoting youth development.	49%	31%	20%
n. Recruiting adult community members to work directly with youth participants.	45%	30%	24%
o. Identifying my own strengths and areas needing improvement.	80%	18%	2%

Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=242)

When asked about specific youth development practices, 70% to 90% of youth workers reported that the training either exposed them to the practice for the first time or helped them improve the practice. (See Appendix D, "Impact of AYD Training on Youth Workers' Practices.") Youth workers reported the following practices as having the greatest impact by either exposing them to the practice for the first time or helping them improve:

- engaging youth in a formal assessment of their strengths as well as their needs (90%);
- engaging youth in specific roles for planning and implementation of activities (85%); and
- identifying their own strengths and areas needing improvement (90%).

Youth workers most often reported the following practices as being presented to them for the first time:

- documenting every participant's developmental goals (29%);
- creating a plan for helping every participant meet his/her developmental goals (30%);
- documenting program changes made based on feedback from youth (30%); and
- engaging youth in youth-led community activities such as community service (28%).

In addition to these findings, results of the pre- and post-training surveys showed that many youth workers were using youth development practices more frequently than before the training. Specifically, about one-third of youth workers taking both surveys reported an increase in the frequency with which they encouraged youth participation, gave youth opportunities to develop or strengthen specific competencies, and planned and implemented activities to achieve positive developmental outcomes for youth in their daily practice. Increases between the pre- and post-training surveys for all three items were statistically significant (see graph on following page).[7]

By the post-training survey, 49% to 55% of youth workers reported "always" including these in their daily practices with youth—an increase of between 10 and 19 percentage points from the pretraining survey (see Table 4).

When asked in an open-ended question which practices the training had affected the most, youth workers most often cited the practices of involving youth in decision making, program planning, and implementation, and assessing their strengths

[7] P<.001, paired sample T-test.

Increased Use of Practice Between the Pre-and Post-Training Survey	
Plans/implements activities that achieve positive developmental outcomes	31%
Provide youth with opportunities to develop youth competencies	32%
Encourage youth to participate in program implementation	31%
Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=242)	

Table 4: Youth Workers' Changes in Practices from Pre- to Post-Training Survey

Changes in Practice	Percentage responding "Always"		
How often do you include the following in your daily practices with youth?	Pre-training	Post-training	Point change from pre- to post-
Plan and implement activities that achieve positive developmental outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging, self-worth).	39%	49%	+10
Provide youth with opportunities to develop or strengthen specific youth competencies (e.g., academics, leadership skills).	36%	55%	+19
Encourage youth to participate in the implementation of programs or activities.	45%	55%	+10
Source: Youth worker pre- and post-training survey (N=242)			

and needs as youth workers, as well as creating incentives for themselves. For example, regarding the area of greatest impact, one youth worker stated:

Remembering that youth need to be brought into every aspect of my work, I am more aware of the need to involve youth and parents in the development and implementation of activities.

When asked how their day-to-day work with youth had changed several months after the training, reflection-log respondents described greater sensitivity to youth and better communication skills (e.g., listening and talking to youth more and involving youth in decision making). Youth workers also mentioned that they related better to youth because they had become more open-minded and knowledgeable about youth development concepts. Typical reflections included:

I concentrate more on listening to the youth. I understand that I don't have all the answers . . . Also I have changed the program by creating a different structure, which includes more of the youths' ideas.

I have changed my thinking as to the type of work youth can contribute to. I never would have involved youth in hiring, budgeting and planning, but now we are creating a youth advisory board, which will do these same tasks.

What Youth Workers Plan to Put into Practice

Youth workers stated in their reflection logs that they planned to implement many ideas and concepts presented in the AYD training, especially those related to youth participation, empowerment, and ownership. For example, some youth workers commented:

I hope that we will be able to give the young people more of a decision-making position.

I want my students to have ownership in the decision-making process and know that they have responsibility for the group and themselves.

Other concepts that youth workers planned to implement included establishing supportive relationships between youth and adults, making youth aware of opportunities, and linking these concepts (supports and opportunities) to positive outcomes. For example, two youth workers stated:

The two main concepts I learned were opportunities and supports—these are what you are trying to provide to youth on a consistent basis. I created a program prior [to this one] but I see where I missed the outcomes. Now I understand the concept and have restructured my youth program.

Opportunities and supports are the first things that come to mind [that I plan to implement]. To make sure youth are aware of what is available to them and show them how to access those things.

Organizations now have the tools and resources to work with kids. They are better-managed agencies and there is a whole **community awareness** that youth have assets.

Several months after the AYD training, youth workers completing reflection logs were asked to write in their logs what, if anything, stood in the way of their using AYD concepts. All 16 respondents reported having implemented some AYD concepts in their work, with a few noting that lack of planning time and resources sometimes made it difficult to do so. Two youth workers also wrote that the public's negative attitudes about youth and youth work were a hindrance. A few youth workers also referred to bureaucracy and restrictive organizational policies and procedures as obstacles to implementing youth development; an insufficient number of staff was another difficulty mentioned by one youth worker.

Increased Understanding of Youth and Youth Development

In the post-training survey, many youth workers reported that the training had the greatest impact on their understanding of youth issues and needs, as well as on their ability to build positive relationships with youth. For example, one youth worker reported that the training helped improve her listening and communication skills and, as a result, her "practices now focus more on the needs, desires, and wants of the youth as voiced by the youth." One respondent described this shift from adult-centered to youth-centered programming as "going from wanting to do programming **for** youth to trying to do programming **with** youth." A few interviewed youth workers also reported that the training influenced the way they viewed youth, causing them to focus on their assets rather than their deficits. One stated:

My approach to reaching youth has changed in the sense that I find myself building on the positive mode of what they do have, versus what they don't.

Most interviewed youth workers reported that the training did not change their understanding of youth development—rather, it clarified, reaffirmed, and augmented their understanding of the concepts:

Before I took the training, I didn't realize there were so many aspects of developing youth.

I am excited about the AYD training and look forward to **sharing this information** with others.

—Youth worker

Now I understand the development and needs of young people more.

In some cases it [my understanding of youth development] has been reinforced and in other cases it has been enhanced. The importance of true youth participation, not just tokenism, was reinforced for me. My ability to avoid "adultism" was enhanced. It helped me to identify these behaviors in myself.

Youth workers frequently reported that the training helped them include youth in their own development in meaningful ways. One interviewed youth worker described how his practices had changed in this respect:

Previously, I would set up a program—the structure and the schedule—and say this is how we are going to do it. Now, I get feedback from the youth—what they would like to do, how they want to do it. They set up things for themselves. It holds their interest longer.

Another put it very succinctly: "Now I let youth do it, not tell them how to do it."

The Value of AYD Training

When youth workers were asked in reflection logs if they would recommend AYD training to others, they unanimously replied "yes." Respondents recommended the training because it gave them useful skills and knowledge, connected them with other youth workers, and, for some, renewed their enthusiasm for youth work:

I would recommend the training to others because it is an opportunity to really discuss some of the issues that surround youth and youth work.

I would recommend this training to others because it can open your mind to a wide range of concepts to assist young people. Young people need as many avenues as possible . . . this training will simply open your mind.

AYD training forces you to examine yourself and your work practices.

Chapter Summary

Youth workers indicated that the AYD training had had a positive impact on their practices, with three-fourths describing the effect as a "great deal" or "good amount." Specifically, through the survey, telephone interviews, and reflection logs, youth workers reported that the training helped them to:

- develop a common language around youth development;
- increase their networking opportunities and interactions with other youth workers;
- include youth in the implementation of programs and activities;
- apply youth development concepts in their work with young people; and
- deepen their understanding of youth and youth development.

In addition, the pre- and post-training surveys revealed statistically significant increases in the frequency with which youth workers encouraged youth participation, gave youth opportunities to develop or strengthen specific competencies, and planned and implemented activities to achieve positive developmental outcomes.

Practices most often used following training included youth workers' involving youth in program development and activities, as well as assessing their own strengths and need for improvement as youth workers. Far fewer youth workers reported that they were regularly able to engage the community in their work with youth—for example, by recruiting community members to work with youth or engaging youth in community service.

Interviewed stakeholders affirmed that the AYD training had helped youth workers improve their practices and provide better services to youth. They also indicated that the BEST Initiative had increased the number of networking opportunities and supports available to youth workers.

Chapter Three
Impact of the BEST Initiative on Organizations

One goal of the BEST Initiative is that local sites build a "system of support" for youth workers. Ideally, youth workers are employed by organizations that pool funding and resources to provide supports to youth workers; collaborate with other organizations to provide a continuum of ongoing professional development opportunities; foster networks and information sharing; and incorporate youth development philosophy and principles into their work. More than two-thirds (69%) of surveyed youth workers said that their participation in the AYD training had an impact on their organizations.

Increased Organizational Supports for Youth Workers

Youth workers have a variety of professional development needs that no single approach to training can meet. An effective system of support provides professional development through many avenues, including formal education, supervision, training, mentoring, internships, site visits, and networking. According to youth workers responding to the pre- and post-training surveys, their organizations supported professional development in many of these ways. As shown in Table 5, at the time of the post-training survey, a majority of respondents reported that their organization "always" or "often" provided support through staff mentoring and constructive feedback from supervisors. Most organizations also offered some funding and release-time for youth workers to attend conferences, workshops, or seminars, although interviews with stakeholders and youth workers revealed that such funding was very limited and more was needed. Less often, organizations provided funding and release-time for youth workers to take academic courses.

When asked whether they saw an increase, decrease, or no change in specific organizational practices since participating in the AYD training, a moderate percentage of youth workers—between 13% and 35%—reported an increase. Practices where youth workers saw the most increase were those occurring within the organization and not requiring additional resources. Specifically, the practices youth workers most frequently reported as increasing were:

- staff members' providing advice or mentoring to other staff (35% said it increased following training); and
- supervisors' providing supervision and constructive feedback to youth workers (32% said it increased following training).

These were also the two practices youth workers most often said occurred "always" or "often" in their organization at the time of the post-training survey.

The practices in which youth workers reported the least amount of increase

Table 5: Frequency of Organizational Practices Supporting Youth Worker Professional Development and Increases in These Practices Following AYD Training

Organizational Practice	Percentage reporting their organization used practice 'always or often'	Percentage reporting practice increased following AYD training
Staff members are available to provide advice or mentoring to other staff.	72%	35%
Supervisors provide supervision and constructive feedback to youth workers.	71%	32%
Organization provides release time for youth workers to attend conferences/workshops/seminars.	60%	29%
Organization provides funding for youth workers to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars.	55%	28%
Youth workers conduct formal observations of other staff members to learn about how they work with youth.	36%	25%
Youth workers conduct formal visits to other organizations to learn about how they work with youth and observe operations.	22%	21%
Organization provides funding for youth workers to attend courses as part of a continuing education program, or to obtain a degree/certificate.	44%	20%
Organization provides release time for youth workers to attend courses as part of a continuing education program, or to obtain a degree/certificate.	44%	18%
Youth workers work in other agencies as part of a staff exchange.	10%	13%

Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=242)

following the training were related to cross-agency collaboration, such as organization-sponsored staff exchanges (13% said it increased following training) and the conduct of learning exchanges with other organizations (21% said it increased following training), as well as additional resources like release-time and funding for youth workers to attend courses (18% and 20%, respectively, said these increased following training). These findings indicate that organizations need assistance in securing funding to allow youth workers to take courses and in identifying strategies for increasing cross-agency learning exchanges.

Increased Collaboration and Networking

Despite the fact that most youth workers reported that their organization did not regularly support interagency staff exchanges or visits, youth workers and stakeholders reported increases in other types of inter- and intra-agency collaborations and networking. Many youth workers reported that they brought back to their colleagues ideas and skills learned at the AYD training. One survey respondent wrote:

The training gave us new skills and ideas to help enhance our programming. We try to share the new information with co-workers.

As noted in chapter two, youth workers also expressed an increased awareness of resources in their communities and indicated that they were more likely to tap into those resources to help meet the needs of the youth with whom they worked. Stakeholders also reported increased willingness among agencies to collaborate with one another and break down the barriers caused by "turf" issues and competition for limited resources.

We now engage in more collaboration. There is a broadened perspective of organizations and a universal language.

Now we don't see collaboration as competition; we know promising practices.

Increased Commitment to Youth Development

For youth workers to integrate youth development practices effectively into their daily work, they need the support of their organization's philosophy, policies, and practices. Stakeholders and youth workers agreed that the BEST Initiative helped increase organizational awareness of and commitment to youth development, a key to providing a system of support. Comments from stakeholders about the impact of the BEST Initiative on organizations include the following:

Organizations have a higher level of awareness and discourse about positive youth development and awareness of youth worker competencies. The higher level of sophistication gives us legitimacy with funders.

According to interviews with stakeholders, the BEST Initiative also had an impact on funders. By increasing their knowledge and awareness of youth development and

Agencies are more conscious about engaging young people. Organizations are more committed to **youth development.**

—Youth worker

youth work, staff in funding organizations can make more informed decisions about funding priorities. One stakeholder explained:

We are a major funder of positive youth development. The training of youth workers is a critical piece. Now we have a better understanding of what to look for [when funding youth programs].

Many interviewed stakeholders reported that the BEST Initiative had increased awareness of youth development among community members and improved their perceptions of youth. Two said:

The community sees young people as active players instead of sideline players.

The community values kids and looks at kids in different ways. BEST is also leading the schools to help them focus on youth development as opposed to delinquency.

Enhanced Youth Programming

The ultimate goal of the BEST Initiative is to strengthen the system of youth worker training so that youth have access to high-quality programs. Many youth workers stated in interviews and in response to open-ended survey questions that they believed their organization was providing better programming to youth because of their participation in the BEST Initiative. According to youth workers, organizations served youth more effectively because the skills of youth workers had improved and the organizations as a whole were more supportive of youth development approaches. Typical comments included:

I noticed many of the staff members I work with are approaching youth from a different perspective and also have a greater sense of unity of cause and more collaboration with other agencies.

[The training] brought the organization closer in trying to achieve one common goal for our youth.

Several stakeholders and youth workers noted that their organizations had improved their practices by increasing the involvement of youth in all aspects of programming. One youth worker wrote in a reflection log: "Teen involvement is increasing and the youth are planning more projects

on their own [since training]." Nonetheless, several youth workers acknowledged that their organizations needed to continue increasing the participation of youth in all aspects of programming.

Further Training Critical

According to the post-training survey, most (69%) of the youth workers felt that their participation in the AYD training had had an impact on their organizations. However, several reported that institutional and organizational changes as a result of training take time and require further training. For example, one youth worker said that "youth development concepts, vocabulary and ideas are on the increase" at his organization but also noted that "more youth workers at his agency should be trained in youth development to have a larger impact." Several others believed that further training for those who participated in AYD training and an expansion of the training to other staff were essential for changes at an organizational level to occur on a larger scale. Stakeholders also noted that to sustain systems of support for youth workers, organizations needed long-term funding as well as policies fostering a youth development approach.

Chapter Summary

According to most surveyed youth workers and interviewed stakeholders, the BEST Initiative and the AYD training had an impact on organizations in several areas. Organizations strengthened the system of supports available to youth workers by increasing professional development opportunities; fostering greater collaboration among agencies and networking among youth workers; and approaching their work with an increased youth development focus. As a result, many youth workers and stakeholders reported that organizations were providing better youth programming. In addition, stakeholders reported that the initiative had a positive impact on community members' understanding of youth development and on their view of youth in general.

Nonetheless, youth workers also cautioned that change at the organizational level takes time. Youth workers and stakeholders alike felt that to sustain change and continue improving services, professional development opportunities should be ongoing and involve a greater proportion of an agency's staff.

Chapter Four
Local Systems of Support

Support for youth workers can take many forms, including training and professional development, networks, access to information resources (e.g., newsletters, the Internet), and organizational policies and practices supporting youth development. This chapter describes responses by surveyed youth workers regarding supports as well as comments by interviewed stakeholders about the unmet needs of youth workers.

Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development is a major aspect of support for youth workers. It includes traditional forms of development, such as workshops, courses, and training, as well as networking, mentoring, and opportunities to critique an organization's mission statement in terms of its support for youth development principles and practice. In telephone interviews, youth workers responded to questions about the different kinds of professional development opportunities in which they had participated and whether additional training would help them implement practices fostering the youth development approach learned at the AYD training. As shown in Table 6, most respondents had participated in various types of professional development and found them helpful. Youth workers who had not participated in these activities noted that they did not have access to them or, in a few cases, did not have time to participate. All youth workers agreed that training for supervisors in the youth development approach would be very helpful to their work, although few reported participating in such an activity. In response to this need, NTI developed a 16-hour course for supervisors and published the accompanying *Supervising Youth Development Practice: A Facilitator's Guide for Training Supervisors of Youth Workers.* NTI is disseminating this curriculum.

When asked which professional development opportunity listed above would be most helpful, nearly half (n=20) of youth workers responded "opportunities for additional training in youth development and other related topics." Almost as many (n=16) said that networking opportunities and mentoring were most important. One youth worker stated, "You don't want to duplicate certain services; you want to benefit from others' knowledge." Another attested to the benefit of a strong network:

As a result of the BEST Initiative, we've started an alumni group—that's one of the best supports because people are sharing ideas and getting more involved with youth work. People feel comfortable calling various individuals if they need help in a specific area. I've learned a lot from people in this group—especially the younger people who are involved!

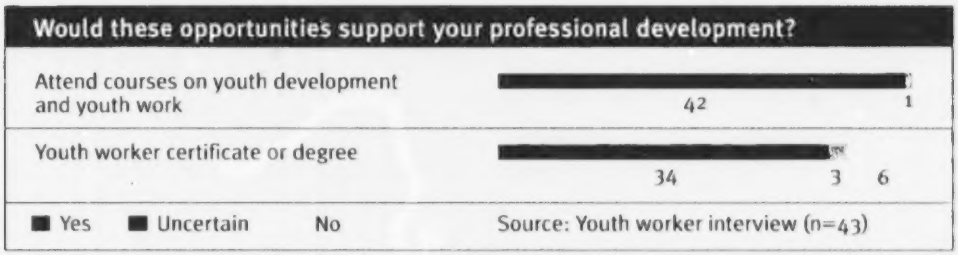
Table 6: Types of Professional Development

Professional Development Activity	Percentage of youth workers who ever participated in activity	Percentage of youth workers who thought activity would help them implement a youth development approach
Networking opportunities (brown bag lunches and local youth worker associations)	79%	98%
Mentoring opportunities	74%	98%
Reviewing organization's mission statement, procedures, and policies to ensure they support a youth development approach	58%	79%
Additional training in youth development and related topics	60%	100%
Training for supervisors/managers and coaching for all staff members with the goal of adopting a youth development approach	37%	100%

Source: Youth worker telephone interview (N=43)

Five of the remaining youth workers (n=5) commented that understanding youth development principles and translating those principles at an organizational level (via an organization's mission, goals, and objectives) were most important. As noted by one respondent, "[The most important is]…reworking a program's guidelines through the lens of youth development."

Youth workers were also asked about academic programs supporting their professional growth. Specifically, youth workers were asked if earning a youth work certificate/academic degree or attending courses focusing on youth development and youth work would be a support to them in furthering their professional growth. Most agreed they would, as the following graph illustrates.



Specifically, 34 of 43 youth workers stated that the opportunity to earn a youth work certificate or academic degree would be advantageous because it would give them credibility and enable them to become more skilled and effective at their jobs. Respondents overwhelmingly believed that a recognized credential, such as a certificate, would give the field more professional status, which would in turn support their work. On the other hand, three youth workers were uncertain as to whether a certificate or degree would make a difference in their professional growth, and six youth workers disagreed that a certificate or degree would be helpful. One of the six stated: "I'm not particularly motivated by a degree or certificate."

When respondents were asked whether they had participated in a youth work certificate or academic degree program, slightly more than half (n=16) said they had. Most (n=15) of the others had not done so because they did not have the funding or release-time from work to take such training or such training was not offered.

Nearly all interviewed youth workers (n=40) reported that taking an academic course in youth development and youth work would support their professional development. Their reasons included:

- It would reaffirm their commitment to their work and enable them to refocus their efforts.
- It would "refresh" or help them gain more knowledge and training in the field.
- It might lead to the possibility of advancing oneself in the field and becoming more effective in their work.

Some youth workers' comments were:

There is lots of refocusing and confirmation [from youth development courses].

These courses can keep you up to date and motivated.

They encourage you to go further into the field.

Only one youth worker with several years of experience disagreed that additional courses would be helpful, saying "It's not for me because I have a lot of experience. But perhaps for younger workers."

Organizational Supports

Youth workers answered a series of questions on the post-training survey about the support they received from their organization for professional development. Most respondents (82%) reported that their organization had some funds available for professional development, although interviewed stakeholders described such funding as very limited. A majority of youth workers (60%) stated that they took advantage of funds for professional development, and over half (57%) said they had input into the types of professional development funded by their organization.

Slightly over half (51%) of the respondents to the post-training survey identified areas in which professional development would support their youth development work. These included conflict resolution, at-risk and foster-care youth, substance abuse, domestic violence, time-management, parent/family involvement, program evaluation, and grant writing. Slightly over 70% of respondents reported that they had discussed their professional development needs and interests with their supervisor.

Shortly after the AYD training, youth workers were asked in reflection logs what help they needed from their organization to use what they had learned in the training. The majority of youth workers commented that supportive supervision and professional development for all colleagues were needed. Youth workers consistently said how important it was for the entire organization, particularly supervisors, to embrace youth development principles for these principles to become a part of their daily work. About one-third of respondents commented that having more planning or release-time was necessary for them to participate in youth development training. Some comments were:

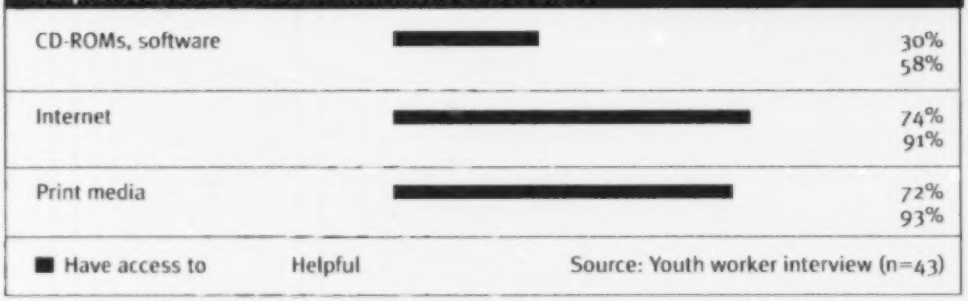
In order to use what I have learned in the AYD training, I will need supportive supervision, cooperation, and continuous training on youth development.

Maybe we need a mandatory training in youth development for all staff so that we are all equipped with the proper tools and guidelines for working with young people on a day-to-day basis. And, as a team, we can have the same goals in mind for the young people.

When asked approximately eight months after their AYD training what assistance their organization provided in terms of professional development, respondents most frequently reported the following: various training and workshops (e.g., AYD, violence prevention, "emotional intelligence," computer training); supportive supervision; and additional resources (supplies, funds to participate in training). This list closely matches what youth workers reported needing from their employers in terms of support, but youth workers also noted that it was a combination of several types of support that made it possible for them to do their work. One stated:

Most employers provide work time and funds to attend training, but offer little mentoring

Helpfulness and Access to Information Resources



on the job. . .It is easy to learn new concepts, but hard to put them into practice. It is very important to set aside time for this reflection process in our work. Otherwise, you are always caught in the "not enough time" trap.

Information Resources

Information resources serve as a form of support for youth workers' professional development. Interviewees were asked about a variety of information resources available to them, including print media (newsletters, journals), Internet-based resources (websites, listservs) and computer-based resources (CD-Roms, software). The following graph shows the percentage of youth workers with access to these resources, as well as the percentage that found these resources helpful in their work.

Most youth workers—more than 90%—reported that the both the Internet and print media were helpful in their work, and about three-fourths had access to each. CD-ROMs and computer software focusing on youth development and youth work were reported by the fewest youth workers as helpful, with many indicating that they did not have access to such resources. When asked which resources were most important for their work, youth workers were nearly evenly split in their responses between print media and Internet-based resources.

Nineteen youth workers noted print media as most important to them, maintaining that newsletters, bulletins, and journals were convenient and easy to copy and distribute. However, several noted that they only knew of a few print resources and were interested in having access to more. Many respondents who found print media the most important resource also indicated that they were wary of computers and found websites unreliable because they were prone to "going down." On the other hand, 17 youth workers said that websites and E-mail listservs were most important, given their easy access, low cost, and immediacy. Few youth workers (4 out of 43) indicated that CD-ROMs and

computer software were the most important information resource for their work; however, many respondents were unfamiliar with such resources.

Unmet Professional Development Needs of Youth Workers

In interviews, stakeholders were asked to identify the primary unmet professional development needs of youth workers. Their responses ranged broadly. For example, two stakeholders discussed academic training and preparation. One thought that youth development should be integrated into the regular curriculum in all schools so that everyone would understand it as part of their knowledge of youth; the other suggested that the academic preparation of youth workers should be much more rigorous because "there is still a gap in their ability to deliver content to youth."

Other opinions about unmet needs concerned the lack of "opportunity for youth workers to communicate and connect," as well as the need for credentials, career ladders, and salary schedules to "help them stay in the field of youth work." A related comment was, "There are better-paying jobs out there that youth workers can take." Two stakeholders reported resources for training as an unmet need. One said, "There is a need to increase the trainer pool and improve the quality. The BEST Initiative created a demand for good training, but there is not enough."

Given these unmet needs, stakeholders discussed what it would take for youth workers to have the support they need. The responses ranged from actions that cities and organizations could take to changing attitudes to youth work.

Examples included:

The city could plan venues/events to bring youth workers together.

Have more field-oriented on-the-job training— now it is too resource- oriented.

Directors of small agencies need to be freed up from administration to do some supportive supervision.

[Organizations and governments need] a different view of youth work.

[Youth workers need] professionalism and getting the community involved.

In terms of the supports needed by the local lead organizations, stakeholders cited funding, staffing, and technical assistance. Example were:

Help [organizations] with developing an action plan.

Mostly funding.

Advocates with funders and fundraising help.

Staff skilled in administration.

The subject of policy needs brought strong statements from stakeholders, who cited the lack of policies supporting youth work and the need for changes in funding, board

In order to use what I have learned in the AYD training, I will need **supportive supervision, cooperation, and continuous training** on youth development.

—Youth worker

composition, and standards/qualifications:

The private sector can't carry it all; we need more public funding.

We need a change in board members [of social service organizations] to those who see the need for finances and support [for youth work].

We need to have standards for youth work.

Policies concerning who gets hired—for example, regarding qualifications.

Chapter Summary

Across the different data sources, youth workers and stakeholders identified a few key supports as critical to youth work. These included continuing professional development opportunities, such as training in youth development and mentoring and networking opportunities, as well as broad-based support from supervisors and co-workers for youth development practices. Additional training in youth development and related topics was reported as the most important support for youth work since it motivates youth workers, enhances their skills, and sometimes leads to promotions. Further, many youth workers believed additional coursework and certificates gave them more credibility. Youth workers and stakeholders also regarded networking and mentoring opportunities as very supportive of youth work; such opportunities enable those in the field to share effective practices and knowledge, often leading to more collaborative services for youth. Finally, youth workers stated that having supportive supervisors and co-workers who understood and embraced the principles of youth development was crucial to their incorporating youth development into their daily practice. Youth workers and stakeholders also mentioned the need for funding of these supports, as well as the need for organizational policies fostering youth development practice.

Chapter Five
Professionalization of Youth Work: Voices from the Field

The status of youth work and how that work is regarded and recognized by funders, agencies, other youth workers, and the public at large are important issues in the BEST Initiative. Much literature on the youth development field calls for the professionalization of the field. Findings from this evaluation show that those working in the field—direct-service staff—also believe that it is important to raise the status of the field and promote youth workers as professionals. The low status of a field is associated with low salaries and poor benefits, few educational opportunities, recruitment and retention difficulties, and lack of identity and value as a professional field.[8] Building a foundation for increased professionalism through high-quality training and fostering a system of supports for youth workers are major goals of the BEST Initiative.

What Would Increase the Status of Youth Work?

Youth workers and stakeholders were asked about a number of factors that might increase the status of youth work, including courses focusing on youth development, youth work certificates or degrees, local campaigns promoting youth work, career ladders, and competitive salaries and benefits. In interviews, most youth workers agreed these factors would increase the status of youth work, but the degree to which they were available in their own communities varied widely (see Table 7).

Just over three-fourths of surveyed youth workers reported that their communities offered local courses (credit or noncredit) focusing on youth development and youth work, and about half said certificates or degrees for youth work were available in their community. Just under half said their communities had local public campaigns to promote youth work as a profession, and about one-fourth said organizations in their community offered career ladders and competitive salaries and benefits for youth workers. Youth workers' and stakeholders' opinions about the contribution of these factors to the professionalization of the field are summarized below.

Coursework and Other Professional Development Opportunities

As discussed in chapter four, the majority of youth workers said that training in youth development and related topics was the most important way to increase the status of the field for two major reasons. First, youth workers believed that specialized training and education in youth work

[8] Carnegie Corporation of New York, Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, *Report on the Consultation on Professional Development of Youth Workers* (New York: Author, 1991).

Table 7: Factors Fostering the Status of Youth Work in the Community			
Do the following occur in your community?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Courses focusing on youth development and youth work	76%	9%	15%
Youth work certificate and/or degree for youth workers	52%	33%	15%
Local public education campaign promoting youth work as a profession	48%	38%	14%
Youth work career ladder determining pay increases	24%	48%	28%
Competitive salaries and benefits for youth workers	23%	70%	7%
Source: Youth worker telephone interviews Note: Percentages were calculated out of the total number who responded to the questions (n=27 to 34).			

facilitate skill development and give youth workers a better understanding of, and a common language around, youth development. Second, youth workers believed that training and education enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the profession and depict youth work as a profession requiring certain skills and knowledge. Several interviewed respondents described training and education as fostering respect for youth workers and "legitimizing the need and specialty of what we do." Typical comments included:

There are a lot of people in the field who are unskilled or have unrelated degrees, and training enables them to do their jobs better.

[Education] encourages youth workers to have a lot more pride in what they do and see it [youth work] as a profession. It's not just something you can walk in off the street and do effectively.

Stakeholders unanimously agreed with youth workers about the need for specialized training and professional development. In both the 1999 and 2001 stakeholder interviews, respondents agreed or strongly agreed that youth workers need specialized training to address the needs of youth effectively; 100% also agreed or strongly agreed that youth workers need professional development on a continuing basis.

Public Campaigns to Promote Youth Work

In addition, many youth workers identified a public campaign promoting the profession of youth work as a vehicle for

increasing the status of the field and the value of youth work. Two youth workers explained:

[A campaign] lets people know what we do is important, valued and needed.

A campaign gets people away from thinking we are glorified baby-sitters.

Further, youth workers reported that the general public should be "educated on what youth work is and how it benefits our community." As noted by one interviewee, the more educated a community is about youth work, the more supportive it will be: "If the community had an understanding of what youth workers did—how we support the community—they would support us." In addition, one youth worker explained the importance of making more widely known the positive impact that youth workers have on young people:

Youth workers need to promote their successes on a local and national level by highlighting a young person's success as a result of participating in a program or by highlighting studies that show positive impact. . . you prove that it is making a difference.

Finally, over half of interviewed youth workers described society as "devaluing youth and the youth work field" and maintained that the public should value young people more in general and see them as "assets rather than deficits" to the community.

Higher Salaries and Career Ladders

Salary was another issue youth workers frequently noted when asked about increasing the professional status of the field. In addition, youth workers said that higher salaries would make recruiting and retaining high-quality individuals to the field easier. For example, one respondent explained how the low pay typically associated with youth work was directly tied to the status of the field as a legitimate profession:

I think most youth workers are underpaid. I also think most of us aren't in it for the money. But what makes it difficult to be so underpaid (aside from paying rent, etc.) is that it seems to symbolically tell us that our work is not valued by our employer—regardless of whether or not that is true.

Most interviewed youth workers reported that, in addition to being low in general, their salaries were "out of sync" with similar fields of work. Of the 30 interviewees who responded to the question, 70% said youth worker salaries and benefits were not competitive with salaries in similar fields. Those who regarded their own salary and benefits as competitive remarked that their situation was anomalous: one interviewee noted she was making a competitive salary because she was "fortunate to work for a good agency."

According to the post-training survey respondents, salaries of full-time youth workers ranged widely: 15% made less than $20,000 per year; 40% made

A campaign lets people know what we do is **important, valued and needed.**

—Youth worker

between $20,000 and $26,000 per year; 30% made between $26,000 and $34,000 per year; and 15% made $35,000 or more per year. The median full-time salary among survey respondents was $25,000, which is lower than that of social workers ($30,590), teachers ($37,890), and registered nurses ($40,690), but higher than the median salary of childcare workers ($17,310).[9] Regarding salary and educational level, youth workers who completed the post-training survey made far less than the average American with the same level of education. For example, the mean salary for youth worker survey respondents with some college was $23,539, compared with $38,070 for individuals with a similar level of education nationwide. The mean salary for survey respondents with a college degree was $25,077, compared with $58,104 nationwide.[10]

In terms of benefits, over two-thirds (68%) of youth workers' employers offered health insurance, and slightly more offered paid vacation (73%) and sick leave (73%) (see Table 9). In comparison, full-time employees nationwide were more likely to have health insurance (76%) and paid vacations (95%) but less likely to have paid sick leave (56%).[11]

To compound the problem of low pay and limited benefits, very few interviewed youth workers reported that their organization had a career ladder determining pay raises for youth workers. This indicates that youth workers may receive substantial pay increases only for promotions to supervisory or higher-level administrative positions. According to the Child Welfare League of America, this is true for many child welfare workers, with the result that "there is little incentive for workers to

[9] Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook: 2000-01 Edition.*
[10] Source: Current Population Survey, 2000.
[11] Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Compensation and Working Conditions Online, Winter 2000.* Data are for employees in larger private establishments.

Table 8: Youth Worker Salary and Benefits (Full-time Employees)	
Salary and Benefits	Amounts and Percentage
Median salary	$25,000
Health insurance	68%
Paid vacation/annual leave	73%
Paid sick leave	73%
Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=91 for salary data, N=194 for other data)	

remain in direct service positions, regardless of their competence and interest."[12] A few interviewed youth workers agreed that a career ladder would help professionalize the field and be an incentive for workers to stay in the field. One youth worker noted: "It [a career ladder] would give people a better idea of what to do to attain different steps."

High Staff Turnover

Two consequences of low status, low pay, and lack of a youth work career ladder are high staff vacancy and turnover rates. According to one study, vacancy rates for child and youth workers are as high as 12%, and turnover rates have increased substantially in the past 15 years. In 1999, the annual turnover rate for full-time staff was 15% at state agencies and 27% at private voluntary agencies.[13]

For youth workers who attended the AYD training, it is not clear what effect the training had on their plans to stay in the field. As shown in the graph below, only 3% of survey respondents said they planned to leave the field within a year, and many (55%) said they planned to stay in the field for at least five more years. (However, these figures cannot be compared directly with the national data cited above because they do not account for the high rate of non-response to the post-training survey.[14]) Almost one-third (32%) of youth workers reported that they were not sure how long they would stay in the

[12] Child Welfare League of America, *The Workforce Crisis in Child Welfare: an Issue Brief* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2000).

[13] Child Welfare League of America, *Children's Voice* (November 2000), cited in "Economic Boom Leaves Youth Agency Jobs Empty," *Youth Today* (July/August, 2001), p. 1, ff.

[14] Slightly over half (56%) of the pre-training survey respondents completed a post-training survey. Many youth workers not responding to the post-training survey had left their job and provided no forwarding address.

How Long Do You Plan to Stay in the Field of Youth Work	
Not sure	32%
5 or more years	55%
3 to 4 years	4%
1 to 2 years	5%
Less than 1 year	3%
Plan to leave as soon as possible	1%
Source: Youth worker interview (n=43)	

field of youth development, and a fairly small proportion (13%, or 40 of the total 242) of respondents, reported that they planned to leave the field within the next four years. Of these 40 respondents, 18 (45%) said that they planned to pursue a different field or profession, such as starting their own business or nonprofit organization. Slightly under one-fourth (9 out of 40) said they were leaving the field to pursue additional formal education, and another one-third (13 out of 40) reported that they would leave the field because they were frustrated and "burned out" by the low pay and the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of the organizations where they worked. The effect of low pay on staff turnover is illustrated by the comment of one youth worker who had left the field at the time of the post-training survey: "I love to work with the youth and I wouldn't mind going back to that type of job if the salaries were better."

Regardless of whether they were planning to stay in the field, a very high percentage of youth workers—nearly half—reported that their job responsibilities had changed in some way (including promotions), or that they had moved on to other jobs by the time the post-training survey was administered, approximately 10 months later. Specifically, of the 42% of post-training survey respondents who said their job had changed since completing the pre-training survey, 45% said they had a change in responsibilities within their current job, and 25% said they had a promotion. The remaining 29% said they had changed jobs altogether (however, respondents were not asked if their new job was within the youth work field). These figures illustrate the tremendously transient nature of youth work even for those staying in the field.

Factors Related to Tenure

Three factors seem to be related to youth workers' plans to stay in the field. First, youth workers who planned to stay in the field three or more years made, on average, higher salaries than those who said they planned to leave within two years. This finding supports the assertions of youth workers and stakeholders that low pay is related to high turnover rates. Second, youth workers reporting that their organization more often provided support in terms of supervision, mentoring, funding, and release-time for professional development were more likely to plan to stay in the field five or more years. Third, youth workers who had a professional development plan and had discussed their professional development needs and interests with their supervisor were more likely to plan to stay in the field five or more years. These findings suggest that retention of youth workers is related to low pay but is also influenced by both the work environment and the support youth workers receive for professional development.

Should Youth Work Require Credentials?

Youth workers and stakeholders disagreed greatly on whether youth workers should be certified. Nearly all interviewed youth workers thought a youth work certificate or degree would bring credibility to the work:

It increases the value [of youth work] because it professionalizes the field.

A certificate adds prestige and credibility and shows the hard work that goes into what we do.

Even those youth workers who did not have access to a youth work certificate or degree in their community saw a need for one. According to two youth workers:

People need to have a certificate or degree to advance in their program or agency.

A certificate or degree would help because a lot of youth workers don't get recognized at the same level as other professions related to young people.

Only one of the 43 interviewed youth workers disagreed. In this youth worker's community, the local community college offered a certificate for youth work. However, this individual reported that employers and those outside the field did not take the certificate seriously and also that the certificate did not reflect an individual's knowledge and skill in youth work.

Stakeholders, however, were much more divided than youth workers about the issue of certification. Despite stakeholders' unanimous agreement that youth workers needed ongoing professional development, there was widespread variation concerning whether youth workers should be certified before beginning work with youth. In fall 1999, 53% of stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed, and, in 2001, 59% agreed or strongly agreed that youth workers should be certified. This means that 47%

...a lot of youth workers don't get recognized at the same level as other professions related to young people.

—Youth worker

of stakeholders in 1999, and 35% in 2001, disagreed or strongly disagreed that youth workers should be certified (with 6% in 2001 having no opinion on this question). Stakeholders who disagreed expressed their opinions as follows:

You can kill interest with so many prequalifications.

Some people have good talent to work with kids. They may need development but should not be disallowed.

People have to get hands-on experience too. Certification doesn't always mean you can do it.

These and other comments indicate that many interviewed stakeholders were cautious about requiring certification before youth workers begin their jobs. They felt that the classroom courses and tests that certification might require are not the only indicators of professionalism in youth work. Furthermore, stakeholders' comments included the suggestion that potential youth workers should be given a chance to begin working without certification, although they should be encouraged to become certified. Yet the six-percentage-point increase, between 1999 and 2001, in the question of whether youth workers should be certified may indicate a trend among stakeholders toward favoring the certification of youth workers.

National Effort to Create a Career Track

In 2001 the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) created an initiative to facilitate a career track for the youth work profession and further define youth work competencies. The BEST Initiative and AYD are important components of this national initiative's Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship Implementation Program. As part of this effort, NTI is working with BEST Initiative sites in Hampton (Virginia), Kansas City, New Haven, New York City, Springfield (Massachusetts), and Washington, DC to plan, design, and pilot elements of Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship Programs. Three BEST Initiative sites, Chicago, Hampton, and Philadelphia won individual awards to pilot the initiative as well.

The apprenticeship programs will offer on-the-job training and other related instruction to help strengthen youth workers' professional competencies. According to DOL:

The vision of occupation recognition and apprenticeship for youth workers is to provide quality training opportunities for youth workers who deliver comprehensive services to young people in order to maximize our investment in young people, in youth programming, and in the workforce development system.[15]

Chapter Summary

Surveyed youth workers overwhelmingly agreed that courses, certificates, and degrees increased the professional status of youth work. They believed continuing education and professional development were crucial to giving the field credibility and developing the skills of youth workers. Further, they suggested a public campaign could be an effective way to increase understanding and knowledge of youth work and improve the status of the profession as well as the public's image of young people. They also agreed that competitive salary and benefits were an important part of professionalizing the field of youth work.

Stakeholders also reported that youth workers need professional development on a continuing basis. However, they disagreed about whether there should be a certification or licensing procedure in the field. Stakeholders saw benefits to certification but also saw the potential for certification to "kill interest" and become a barrier to individuals' entering the field. Many stakeholders and youth felt that low salaries and limited employment benefits were related to the low professional status of the field.

Responses indicated that the same salary and benefits issues are also related to the low rate of youth workers intending to stay in the field. Although a majority (55%) of youth workers completing the survey said they planned to stay in the field for at least five more years, a substantial proportion, nearly one-third, were not sure how long they would, and 13% planned to leave within the next four years. Survey data also showed that youth workers with higher salaries and more support for professional development from their supervisor and organization were more likely to say they would stay in the field longer.

[15] U.S. Department of Labor website: http://wdsc.doleta.gov/sga/awards/01-103award.asp, Summer 2001.

Chapter Six
Research Conclusions and Implications

The emerging youth development field has been challenged by its low professional status, lack of infrastructure to support the ongoing professional development of youth workers, and need for greater investments in youth worker education and training. This study demonstrates that the BEST Initiative is effective both as a strategy and a model for building a system of professional development services and supports to youth workers. The model allows for flexibility for every community to respond to its local context but also promotes a common philosophy, language, and nationally recognized curriculum. As a strategy, national technical assistance can help a wide variety of communities adapt the implementation of BEST.

The results of this study show that:

- Professional development is a critical element of a youth-serving sector's infrastructure for maintaining quality staff and programs.
- A common language and strong networks for information sharing are key to supporting youth workers.
- In addition to the requisite skills and knowledge, youth workers must have support and a commitment to youth development from supervisors and the organization as a whole to implement effective programming.
- Professional development must be continuous and provide a range of opportunities to increase youth workers' knowledge of youth development and skill in providing programming for youth.
- Building organizational capacity to support youth workers helps improve retention among youth workers.
- A system of supports for professional development opportunities deepens the impact of AYD training on youth worker practice.

Many questions about the impact of the BEST Initiative could not be answered by this study. As the field continues to develop, additional research is necessary to guide efforts to professionalize the field. Future research should address the questions listed below. Answers to these questions will further understanding of this study's findings and provide future directions for expanding and sustaining professional development opportunities for youth workers.

Young People

- To what extent do young people experience a change in the practice of youth workers trained in AYD?
- What lessons can be learned from the

What BEST gave us is useful and resourceful. Youth workers are **more confident** in their work...

—Youth worker

BEST sites that have linked AYD training programs to standards for youth programs?

AYD Training Program Delivery

- What would be gained or lost in the delivery of the AYD training programs through online/distance learning technology?
- Do certain characteristics of youth workers, such as educational levels, workplace settings, and job responsibilities, have an influence on who has access to AYD training programs?
- Is fee-for-service a viable strategy for sustaining local BEST initiatives?
- Would AYD training, tailored for teachers, probation officers, healthcare workers, school counselors, and other professionals who work with youth, strengthen young people's ability to achieve developmental youth outcomes?

Professionalization

- What is the long-term impact of the BEST Initiative on recruitment and retention patterns of youth workers?
- Will expansion of AYD training programs increase the demand of youth workers for youth development certificate, degree, and apprenticeship programs?
- How can the BEST Initiative help create a career path for youth workers with increased salaries and benefits and further professionalize the field?

In conclusion, the evaluation findings demonstrate that the BEST Initiative is meeting its goals. It clearly addresses the needs of the youth work profession identified through this study and fosters an infrastructure of professional development and support for the field of youth development.

For more information about the BEST Initiative and for a summary version of this report, contact NTI at (202) 884-8334 or www.nti.aed.org

Appendix A: BEST Site Contact Information

Boston
The Medical Foundation
622 Washington Street.
Dorchester, MA 02124
Phone: (617) 423-4337
http://www.tmfnet.org/best.html

Chicago
Chicago Youth Agency Partnership
200 North Michigan Ave., Suite 400
Chicago, IL 60601
Phone: (312) 372-6735
http://www.youthnetworkcouncil.org/cyap.html

Hampton
The Training Institute at Alternatives, Inc.
2013 Cunningham Drive, Suite 104
Hampton, VA 23666-3306
Phone: (757) 838-2330
http://www.altinc.org/best_indx.htm

Jacksonville
Jacksonville Children's Commission
421 West Church Street, Suite 222
Jacksonville, FL 32202
Phone: (904) 630-3647
http://www.jaxchildrenscommission.org

Kansas City
YouthNet of Greater Kansas City
104 West 9th Street, Suite 104
Kansas City, MO 64105
Phone: (816) 221-6900
http://www.kcyouthnet.org

Milwaukee
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
Child & Youth Care Learning Center
161 West Wisconsin Ave., Suite 6000
Milwaukee, WI 53203
Phone: (414) 227-3356
http://www.uwm.edu/UniversityOutreach/catalog/CYCLC

Minneapolis/St. Paul
Center for 4H Youth Development
University of Minnesota
200 Oak Street SE, Suite 270B
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The Youth Development Training &
Resource Center and
The Consultation Center
389 Whitney Avenue
New Haven, CT 06511
Phone: (203) 789-7645
http://www.theconsultationcenter.org/ydtrc/home.htm

New York
Youth Development Institute
Fund for the City of New York
121 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10013
Phone: (212) 925-6675
http://www.fcny.org/html/home.htm

Philadelphia
Children, Youth & Family Council
Education Consortium
111 North 49th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19139
Phone: (215) 748-4688
Email cyfc@libertynet.org

Greater Philadelphia Federation
of Settlements
100 North 17th Street, 5th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Phone: (215) 568-5860
http://www.greatsettlements.org

Pinellas
Juvenile Welfare Board
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Pinellas Park, FL 33781-5060
Phone: 727-547-5617
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Portland
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Springfield
Partners for a Healthier Community
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Springfield, MA 01105
Phone: (413) 794-1674
http://www.wmassbest.com

San Francisco
Community Network for Youth
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DC Children and Youth Investment
Trust Corporation
1301 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
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Appendix B: Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation activities were conducted between fall 1999 and spring 2001. All 15 sites were included in some data collection activities. Four sites were selected to be "intensive" evaluation sites. The intensive sites included two phase-I sites (Kansas City and New York City) and two phase-II sites (Chicago and New Haven).

Youth Worker Survey

The youth worker survey was administered to all youth workers participating in the AYD training from January through June 2000 in 14 sites.[1] BEST site staff administered the pre-training survey before the first session of the training. Participants were asked to provide their name and contact information on the survey so that the site could locate the youth worker in the fall to administer the post-training survey. However, youth workers were assured of confidentiality in their responses, and no individual data were reported. Post-training surveys were administered to youth workers from October through December 2000. The survey included questions about the respondent's job and the organization he/she worked for; practices in work with youth; professional development opportunities; and personal background information. A total of 433 youth workers from 14 sites completed the pre-training survey. This represents approximately one-third of all youth workers trained at these sites in 2000. A total of 242 youth workers from the same sites completed the post-training survey for a 56% return rate.

Stakeholder Interviews

Telephone interviews conducted with various types of BEST initiative stakeholders were an integral part of documenting and evaluating the initiative. These interviews were designed to elicit general and detailed opinions about the contexts and processes related to implementing and operating the project. The interviews also elicited examples of interactions among funders, agencies, and programs resulting in various outcomes and impacts.

The BEST initiative directors at each intensive study site identified five stakeholders to interview. AED evaluators asked them to identify people in the following four categories:

1. **Funders:** Individuals primarily in charge of providing financial and technical assistance to organizations and agencies.

2. **Executive Administrators:** Directors and officers of youth-serving agencies or local governmental agencies with managerial, supervisory, and governance roles but no continuous direct contact with youth workers.

[1] Youth workers from one site were not asked to complete the survey because the training provided at that site differed substantially from the AYD curriculum, and the training schedule did not coincide with the survey data collection schedule.

3. Practitioners: Consultants, coordinators, trainers, and program directors in large multiservice organizations who carried out most or all of their work directly with youth workers.

4. Youth Workers: Staff members whose primary mission was to work directly with youth using a development approach, although they may also have had some administrative duties at their organizations.

The first stakeholder interviews (n=19) were conducted late in 1999 and the second set (n=17) in 2001. In the second round, evaluators attempted to interview the same people; however, in two cases a substitute was interviewed, and in two other cases no substitute was available. The interview sought information about:

- roles played in BEST by each stakeholder and his/her organization;
- specific perceptions about the needs of youth workers and the ways in which the youth work profession is structured; and
- information regarding the current state of youth work in general, including the needs of youth-serving agencies and the impact of BEST.

Most of the interview consisted of open-ended questions, but interviewees were also asked to respond to a series of nine specific statements using a Likert-scale format. Except for a few new questions asking about change over the past two years, the interview guide in 2001 was identical to the one used in 1999.

Youth Worker Reflection Logs

The purpose of the youth worker reflection logs was to obtain more in-depth knowledge about how youth workers incorporated AYD training and youth development principles into their work. Eight youth workers from each intensive BEST study site were asked to complete reflection logs three times a year. In terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, and type of organization where they worked, these youth workers were representative of the youth workers trained by each site.

Youth worker reflection logs were administered during spring 2000, the end of summer 2000, and fall/winter 2000. Of the 32 youth workers selected in the four sites to complete logs, 20 responded. Some youth workers did not complete all three logs: 20 completed log one, 15 completed log two, and 16 completed log three for a total of 51 completed logs.

In the logs, youth workers were asked to reflect on the AYD training and supports as well as barriers to applying what they learned to their work. Specific questions included:

- How relevant were the youth development concepts and ideas (presented in

the AYD training) to your work with youth?

- Since you participated in the AYD training, in what ways has your day-to-day work with youth changed?
- What, if anything, do you feel stands in the way of your using the concepts and ideas you learned in the AYD training?
- Does your organization provide any additional support for your work with youth?

Youth Worker Telephone Interviews

In-depth, structured telephone interviews were conducted with 43 youth workers from 15 sites. Each site identified eight youth workers who successfully completed the AYD training between summer 1999 and summer 2000. Identified youth workers were representative of the youth workers trained by each site in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity and the type of organization where they worked. Some interviewees also may have completed the youth worker survey. From among the eight identified youth workers from each site, interviewers conducted 30-minute interviews with two-to-four individuals. The interview covered topics on professional development experiences supporting youth worker practice, community supports for youth workers, and issues related to the professionalization of youth work.

Appendix C: Advancing Youth Development Curriculum: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers

Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers, produced by the AED/Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in collaboration with the National Network for Youth, Inc., is designed to train staff, managers, supervisors, and trainers to deliver youth development training to youth workers. The curriculum is available to participants who attend Training of Facilitator programs.

The goals of the curriculum are as follows:

- Participants become highly familiar with a "youth development approach" to youth work and gain a solid understanding of how the approach provides a "value-added" aspect to youth policies and programs.
- Participants learn practical strategies for integrating a youth development approach into their current practices in working with youth from high-risk situations.
- Participants gain the ability to effectively "model" a youth development perspective to colleagues and community constituencies.

Training of Facilitator programs prepare facilitators to deliver 28 hours of youth development training to youth workers.

The curriculum is composed of seven sessions with these objectives:

- **Session 1: Introduction to the Youth Development Approach**
  - Participants identify the goals and structures of the curriculum.
  - Participants articulate the importance of youth work in the lives of young people.
  - Participants gain a greater appreciation for the power of language.
  - Participants are introduced to two essential youth development concepts.
- **Session 2: Developmental Youth Outcomes: The Bottom Line of Youth Work**
  - Participants identify the behaviors, skills, knowledge areas, and attitudes needed by young people to be successful.
  - Participants apply developmental outcomes to program and organizational goals.
  - Participants articulate the implications of defining youth outcomes in developmental terms.
- Participants use indicators to assess a young person's achievement of developmental outcomes.
- **Session 3: Cultural Assumptions and Stereotypes About Young People: From Adultism to Caring Adults**
  - Participants identify the common

cultural assumptions about young people and how these assumptions play out in practice.

- Participants identify five forms of "adultism" that affect young people on a daily basis.
- Participants identify alternative caring behaviors to adultism.
- Participants learn strategies for addressing adultism in organizational and community practice.

- **Session 4: Strategies of Youth Participation**
- Participants identify benefits of and strategies for youth participation.
- Participants learn about and apply two important concepts of youth participation: information-sharing and active listening.
- Participants learn ways to involve youth from high-risk settings in their programs.
- Participants learn strategies for explaining the importance of youth participation to their constituencies.
- **Session 5: Opportunities and Supports for Youth Development: Identifying Best Program Practices**
- Participants identify the key opportunities and supports that promote youth development.
- Participants identify and assess "best program practices" by focusing on opportunities and supports.
- Participants identify guidelines for institutionalizing opportunities and supports into ongoing youth development organizational practice.
- **Session 6: Core Competencies of Youth Workers**
- Participants identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they have that contribute to their success as youth workers.
- Participants develop indicators of core competencies with which to measure their professional development.
- Participants identify strategies for developing core competencies.
- Participants assess their core competencies and develop strategies for strengthening them.
- **Session 7: Review, Practice, and Celebration**
- Participants define and explain the importance of youth work.
- Participants review the practices that reflect exemplary youth work.
- Participants identify how key youth development concepts can influence youth work.
- Participants undertake a presentation illustrating what they have learned to their constituencies.

Appendix D: Impact of AYD Training on Youth Worker's Practices

Youth Development Practice	What impact did your participation in the AYD training have on this practice?		
How often do you include the following in your daily practices with youth?	The training had no impact on this practice.	The training exposed me to this practice for the first time.	I was using the practice before the training and the training helped me improve the practice.
a. Engaging youth in a formal assessment of their strengths as well as their needs.	10%	28%	62%
b. Documenting each participant's developmental goals.	23%	29%	49%
c. Creating a plan for helping each participant meet his/her developmental goals.	17%	30%	53%
d. Planning and designing activities that promote developmental goals.	16%	24%	60%
e. Engaging youth in specific roles for planning and implementation of activities.	15%	22%	63%
f. Engaging youth in specific roles for decision making and leading activities.	14%	27%	60%
g. Soliciting on-going feedback from youth as a part of program evaluation.	16%	23%	60%
h. Documenting program changes made based on feedback from youth.	22%	30%	48%
i. Meeting with youth to discuss their progress towards goals and assess their needs and concerns.	17%	22%	61%
j. Working with youth to help them understand and appreciate diverse cultures, races, genders, disabilities, and sexual orientations.	17%	21%	62%
k. Working with youth to help them create rewards for participation.	18%	26%	57%
l. Engaging youth in youth-led community activities such as community service, advocacy, and civic leadership.	19%	28%	53%
m. Participating in communitywide activities that promote youth development.	24%	22%	54%
n. Recruiting adult community members to work directly with youth participants.	29%	24%	47%
o. Identifying my own strengths and areas needing improvement.	10%	27%	62%

Source: Youth worker post-training survey (N=242)

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